

The Strange World of Drivers

Car drivers are a strange bunch. I observe their antics the way a 1930s anthropologist observes a newly discovered tribe.

I've lived in Exeter for more than 30 years and I've seen astonishingly strange behaviour from car drivers.

There's the question of stillness. The question of personal peace.

As a pedestrian I stroll along, enjoying the freedom from stress, enjoying the absence of "road rage". Sometimes I stop and simply stand still for a few minutes. Enjoying the peace. If I am anywhere within sight of a road my peace is often shattered by some fool of a car driver stopping and trying to get me to cross the road. They honk, they wave, they gesticulate. They think that a pedestrian standing still needs to cross the road. It doesn't seem to matter to them that I'm not standing at the kerb or even anywhere near the kerb. It doesn't seem to matter to them that I'm not looking in the direction of the road. I'm standing several metres away from the road and looking in a different direction entirely, at the horizon, or at the structure of some architecture, or at the complex form of a branching tree, or whatever. I've got a degree in Fine Art after all.

It makes no difference to the car driver how far I am from the road or where my attention is fixed. They see a pedestrian standing still for a moment and they try to make me go and cross the road.

Bizarrely, this attitude completely reverses when they approach a pedestrian crossing or traffic lights. When they reach a traffic light they often stop too late and block the pedestrian crossing by being accidentally parked across it. The walker who is trying to cross on a legitimate crossing is then seen by the driver as a nuisance.

One time near Saint David's station a bus driver slammed on the brakes and screeched to a halt at a zebra crossing, giving all of his passengers inertial whiplash no doubt, because I was halfway across the zebra and he somehow had forgotten to slow down at the zig-zag lines.

A similar thing happened to me once in London but on that occasion the car didn't even stop and I had to dive for my life to the pavement. The driver carried on, oblivious, across the crossing and onward, his car windows open and blaring out dub reggae at the volume of an over-enthusiastic political campaign tannoy.

Another time, in Exeter, I tapped on the window of a car to complain to the driver that he had parked on the pedestrian crossing. To my amazement he followed in his car, shouting threats at me from his window. Then he parked in a bus stop area and jumped out of the car, following me down the street, shouting threats that he was going to "knock my head off" for touching his car window.

Then he ran back to his car and I thought that that was the end of it but he drove slowly along, kerb crawling, until he saw that I had reached the next road to cross. He was waiting until I stepped from the kerb. Then he slammed his foot on the accelerator and zoomed

around that corner, attempting to run me down. Luckily he only clipped the edge of my shopping bag. Then he pulled in to a parking position and climbed from the driving seat to the car's rear window and began making rude gestures and mouthing words. I couldn't hear what he was saying because he was still inside the car but I responded but pretending to be exaggeratedly friendly and nice, waving and saying "Hello!" in a very cheery tone.

There are people behind the steering wheel of a car who will attempt actual murder to punish a pedestrian for gently tapping on the car window.

I chose when I was a teenager to never take driving lessons. I chose to abstain from contributing to global air pollution. When I was in my twenties I worked in petrol stations, first as a petrol pump attendant and then as a cashier. As you can imagine I had to consider very seriously the ethics of working in the petrol station industry. I concluded that having a job in that industry would not increase the amount of petrol sold or the amount used by drivers. Working there would not add to world pollution in any way. If I were not there someone else would be doing the exact same job in the exact same way. So I worked in petrol stations and observed car drivers at close quarters.

I was fortunate in that I was born in the South East of England. The South East is a place where very few people ever need to own or drive a car because there are trains and bus routes covering the entire area in every direction. Anywhere that a person needs to go in the South East there will always be a train or a bus that goes there. Often there are multiple choices of alternate routes between Surrey, Sussex, London, Kent, Essex etc. etc. Of course, a lot of people do have cars but most of them don't actually need to be a driver. They just choose to be one because the personal ego boost of driving is more important to them than the planetary environment.

Note to self: Jack Kirby - Ego the Living Planet. Hah!

It's a bit more complicated for people living in the South West or the North and, of course, there are places in the world, America or Australia for instance where access to a fast car or other vehicle might be the difference between survival or fatality.

I was speaking to a pair of American Mormons in Exeter High Street a few years back and one of them told me he had heard that "London is now closed!" I was very puzzled at first, trying to figure out why he would think that the entire city of London could be "closed". After some confusion it turned out that he was talking about the "park and ride" system, designed to reduce congestion in the city centre. To his American way of thinking a city without cars was "closed", like a no-go area or something.

When I worked in jobs in London I rode the Underground. When I worked in jobs in Exeter I got a bicycle. People kept telling me that they had heard that I was a "keen cyclist". That was ridiculous. I wasn't a keen cyclist. I was simply employing a bike as a means of transportation to work. A policewoman once asked me things like "Have you ridden the Coast Road?" as if I was doing it for some sort of sport! No. It was purely and simply a means of low carbon footprint transportation.

Little Side Story Meandering From the main theme of this essay:

Once when I was working as a nightshift cleaner in Sainsbury's supermarket the cleaning supervisor told me he was having trouble with his computer. He said it didn't have drivers. I listened to his description of the problem and I tried to explain to him what "drivers" means in the context of the Microsoft Windows Operating System. I was telling him about dynamic link libraries (DLLs) and how the software depends on them to access various necessary routines of code. The supervisor was obviously baffled and thought that "drivers" was the name of some computer game. He wanted to know how to play it so that his computer would work again.

Three times in my life I've been bullied by car drivers into accepting a lift in their car when I didn't want to go. The first was when I was in the Emin and Angela Bruce insisted on driving me home even though I told her repeatedly that I preferred to travel on the bus from Putney Bridge Station so that I could read my book. The second was when I worked at a petrol station in South Wimbledon and a police constable insisted on driving me home after I'd finished locking up the workplace at the end of my shift. Again I had told him several times that I preferred to walk because I enjoyed the peace and quiet of walking home at night, alone with my thoughts. The third time was when I was doing unpaid volunteer work at the centre in Radstock for adults with extreme learning disabilities. One of the paid assistants who worked there and had a hobby studying the pseudoscientific subject of "Radionics" insisted on driving me home to where I lived in Glastonbury. The same thing again. I had told her over and over that I preferred to get the bus. I had already got the return half of my ticket and I wanted to read my book. These are examples of the arrogance of car drivers who think they are doing you a favour by making you travel in their gas guzzling contraptions.

I was once attacked in the street by a man and a teenage boy who turned out to be a plainclothes policeman and his accomplice. I was on my way home from work. I had been sweeping the streets of Exeter all day for Exeter City Council and I was walking home with my bicycle by my side. I was forced to the ground and handcuffed before being released and told that it was a case of mistaken identity. A uniformed policeman who attended the scene of the incident asked me "Have you got a Lexus?" He was grinning and looked very proud of himself. I didn't know what a "Lexus" was and I was thinking that it sounded Latin, rhyming with Nexus and Plexus and had possible links to Roman Catholicism and Henry Miller, the Crucifixion, 1960s science fiction and so on. Also Lex Luthor in comics. This is the way my mind works. Say an unfamiliar word like "Lexus" and I immediately think of the rhymes and connections of similar words. However the policeman refused to explain what he meant by "Lexus". They always refuse to explain what they're talking about. They take great pleasure in baffling the general public.

Later, when I did some research, I discovered that "Lexus" is the brand name of a motor car. I'm guessing that the reason the policeman looked so proud of himself may perhaps be that he himself owned such a vehicle and was using it as a status symbol of his financial superiority over a mere street sweeper such as myself. The police are always all about "The Money".

If we're talking status symbols I suppose being able to walk could be one.

I've almost always worked in physically active jobs. I pity the poor sods who travel to their office jobs in their car in a sitting position, spend their day in the office doing their work at their desks in a sitting position, travel home again in a sitting position and, when they get home, they sit.

No wonder they become unhealthy. Sitting, sitting, sitting and sitting until they sleep. That isn't healthy. In psychological symbols they might be the king or queen on their throne or in their chariot but it's bad in terms of physical health.

How galling it must be for the drivers when they are gridlocked and seeing the pedestrians and cyclists speeding past them.

Of course all activity has some sort of environmental impact. Bicycles have to be made in factories. Metal and rubber has to be obtained from nature. Even walking has a footprint (oh I'm so hilarious.....).

When I lived in Polsloe Road and I went to work each day at the council sweepers' depot in Exton Road on Marsh Barton Industrial Estate I used to start work each morning at seven o'clock. That meant that I had to get up at six and get ready to go. It took me nearly half an hour to cycle to Exton Road so I would leave the house at half past six. Riding down Polsloe Road into Barrack Road I was followed on several occasions by a car. There were very few other vehicles on the road, so a bicycle being followed by a car was unmistakable. I would ride down that road in all kinds of weather and there was this car. Following me. When I got the bottom of Barrack Road I needed to change lanes to turn right. As a cyclist I was on the left side of the road, next to the kerb. To turn right I needed to be in the centre with my right hand extended to signal a right turn. This was a problem because the car tailing me was in the way. So I had to stop, get off the bike and walk with the bike to the centre of the road, then mount the bike again, stick my right hand out and make my right turn into Topsham Road.

The car continued to follow me. I was amazed that they were able to drive so slowly. I continued along Topsham Road and then turned left into Salmon Pool Lane. The car was only able to follow me to the bottom of Salmon Pool Lane because I then rode across a small park and several footbridges and Duckes Meadow as I crossed the River Exe and then turned right into Water Lane to get to the Recycling Depot in Exton Road.

After a few days the car lost interest and didn't follow me again. I could have stopped and asked why they were following me but that would have made me late for work and I had eight and a half hours of work ahead of me each day so I didn't want to start it by being told off for lateness. I simply concluded that bloody car drivers are all raving mad and I left it at that.